

Mercurial Witness

Medbh McGuckian, *Drawing Ballerinas*. Gallery Press,
£7.95 (pbk), £13.95 (hbk)

Medbh McGuckian's political engagement with the Troubles in Northern Ireland has been clear ever since she used a quotation from Picasso as the epigraph to *Captain Lavender* (1994): "I have not painted the war... but I have no doubt that the war is in these paintings I have done". The title of this seventh collection may seem at first to offer an implicit apology for an aesthetic that haloes around the Troubles rather than documenting its vicissitudes head-on, but this assumption would be misplaced. McGuckian's poetry is preoccupied with the making of history: it explores how evanescent tragedies are monumentalised, or even betrayed, in their emotional and political consequences; and what part textual culture—to which these poems contribute—plays in conveying present times to future record. *Drawing Ballerinas* grieves as it writes for its own documentary status. The collection is a witness to the "mid-sentence years" of the peace process, animated by the presence of the dead and their demand for recognition. A footnote to the title poem, which is dedicated to a childhood friend killed in the Abercorn Café bombing of 1972, explains that Matisse "when asked how he managed to survive the war artistically, replied that he spent the worst years 'drawing ballerinas'". The detachment implicit in this statement is undercut here in end-stopped stanzas that see the memory of Ann Frances Owens as a girl traced with ballerina delicacy and overlaid with the image of her adult body's pirouette and disintegration at the moment of the explosion:

A ringlet of hair tied with black silk
rests in a medallion of white shell, a machine-gun
in its nest, a crease in the middle of a flower...

The oval of the head is a wire folded
 in tension to spring back at right angles
 across the neck from which it has been lifted.
 And what are those unnerving sparks of matter,
 the astonishingly open, misaligned eyes?

Matisse's pen-and-inks are taken up in the black on white of silk
 on shell, or wire against space, and in the almost kinetic typog-
 raphy of the poem itself paradoxically marking out a pure mem-
 ory of virgin girlhood over the blast of the explosion and the
 whiteness of the page.

And the lines' desire is to warp to accommodate
 a body, a lost and emptied memory of a lost
 body, the virgin mind emptied from or of it,
 to discover the architecture of the pressed-together
 thighs, or lips that half-belong to a face.

McGuckian's talent for framing sensual images within each
 other is at its strongest within this powerful elegy.

Her aesthetic suits Northern Ireland's historical moment,
 caught in a cease-fire where the best hope seems to be a contin-
 uing stasis maintained by postponing the particulars promised
 in the Good Friday Agreement. This means the obliqueness that
 has frustrated critics in the past (viz., Elizabeth Lowry's review
 of her *Selected Poems in Metre* 4) can be read as politically moti-
 vated:

In the text of peace
 the strongest argument has hands,
 the weak a cloak, but no names
 are heard at all.

("The Disinterment")

Here, as elsewhere in the collection, a knowledge of contempo-
 rary political events supplies a specificity withheld from the
 reader—the title, the open landscape, the invocation of
 "Reconciliation" lying "close to her spokesman Hermes", all
 point to the search for the bodies of those abducted by the IRA,
 conducted unsuccessfully in 1999. The allusions to the weather

forecast and “curtains half-fitted to each other” in “At Mullaghmore” also achieve greater resonance once the location is identified as the coastal village situated on the boundary between Sligo and Donegal, from which Mountbatten set sail on a fishing trip in 1979 that abruptly ended in his assassination by an IRA bomb.

A broad knowledge of this political background helps greatly in enjoying McGuckian’s mercurial narratives, although individual images will convey a powerful sense of threat to any audience, “The radio, that fair-faced conspirator, purred/ with a positive belongingness...” or “an unreal warship” that “sculpts the coast” and “spread open my warren’d days/ by the dayful, all its seamless miles”. These images tack and turn and change shape, and the reader is better off, as always with her poetry, letting go the wish to locate their referents at each step and instead allowing the syntax to guide him or her through a sensual understanding of the lines. McGuckian has often argued that the connections between images are made “instinctually”, a risky strategy that can pay off marvellously as in “The Swan Trap”, where the anatomy of the bird is allowed to metamorphose into conversation, writing and the landscape before paradoxically opening out into the politics (Republican?) that are identifiable as the trap of the title:

Like upright script my neck’s outstretched
pillow creases take off into the wind:
like a hint of sea on the air, a gentle blue,
a blue feather pattern quivers

the much decorated, swiftest part of the river.
And so intensely the proper inhabitants
of the true wild dive together,
their killable gold-plated shoulders

diving deep, into each other’s
wilder places, where an ancient enemy
or an evaporating memory
concentrates on a square-lipped

lasting peace, superbly green,
its heart as large as a bull,

its arteries wide enough
for a child to crawl thorough.

These lines succeed because the syntax is clear, despite the initial hesitation over whether “creases” is verb or noun. Occasionally, however, it seems that McGuckian is happy to confound the reader with accumulating layers of imagery which gather around the interpretation of a personal experience that remains inaccessible, as in these lines:

In a room full of half-dead flowers and fruit
winter’s petal-like discovery is your Napoleonic coat:
whose English is English, whose shoulder blades mean
how the twenty-four hours go round.
 (“A Perfume Called ‘My Own’”)

It is difficult not to desire some particular narrative about invasion that would resolve “the half-dead flowers” and the “petal-like discovery” into a further gloss on “Napoleon” or the man “whose English is English”. But elsewhere, small *aperçus* are offered on the act of writing which make clear that, for all the talk of “instinct”, this layering conducts a deliberate and consciously-crafted play with our demands for identifiable structures and stories (“rhymes buried in folds of meaning/ wrenched into a small space”).

Why then does McGuckian so persistently withhold the clear micro-histories of family, nature or locale that Edna Longley has described as characteristic of her Irish contemporaries? This question is particularly relevant to three poems—“Oration”, “Monody for Aghas” and “Black Raven on Cream-coloured Background”. In reply to a query about the identity of “Aghas”, McGuckian told me it referred to the Irish Volunteer and Kerry school-teacher, Thomas Ashe. During the 1916 Rising, Ashe was commander of the Fingal battalion and responsible for the Volunteers’ one military success, an attack on a police barracks in Ashbourne, Co. Meath. In September 1917, he went on hunger-strike in Mountjoy to protest against the refusal of political status and died three days later as a result of force-feeding by the authorities; Michael Collins gave his graveside oration.

Despite being commemorated in verse by Sean O’Casey, Thomas Ashe is largely a forgotten name to Irish

Republicanism. Although “Aghas” is the Irish for “Ashe”, the Gaelicisation is uncommon and there are no notes or dedication to refer the reader to this history. Why? Without this context, the first poem of the trio, “Oration”, reads as a meditation on the act of elegising dead martyrs, its closing lines ambiguous in their refusal to “write your name till it becomes the man”. The second poem, “Monody for Aghas”, positions the mourner as witness to the original force-feeding. It describes the scene in simpler terms, the sites of imprisonment and hospitalisation, “the Bridewell and the Curragh,/ Mountjoy and Ship Street” and the attending officers “Max Green, Sir Arthur Chance,/ Dr Lowe and the JP” providing sufficient detail for the assiduous researcher to track down Ashe’s particular history. In the third poem, “Black Raven on Cream-coloured Background”, the anonymous Ashe is commemorated in more erotic terms as “the bonniest, most dashing of fighters”, also as a nightingale caught in the talons of a hawkish government. Typically the last stanza refuses to display these historical particulars. However rather than being read as obfuscatory, this refusal can be sympathetically understood as an explicit and self-conscious part of McGuckian’s aesthetic, necessary in a city where the images of Republican martyrs are literally calcified in gable-end murals on dead-end streets.

The Muse takes care of it, deeply recessed,
so primitively crushed: she holds
and freshens in this air of withering sweetness,
close-knit and somewhat stifling, the barest shadow
of its most stately, most mobile mouth.

By running Ashe’s history through the poem as an underlying narrative, McGuckian manages to write three intensely felt elegies about hunger-strike and the confrontation between political idealism, sacrifice and the state, while refusing to reduce any life to simple martyrdom. The resistance of the poem to the event is vitally understood, not as an escape from, but as a full engagement with, the complexities of articulating a contemporary history where tragedy is often turned into a blood currency through force of rhetoric and acts of commemoration. In this territory “where landscape has become language”, “the barest shadow” is all the impress of martyrdom that a poem can risk

without sliding into propaganda.

Drawing Ballerinas is an important, deeply thought out, and often brilliant contribution to the literature of the Troubles. Cryptic references to the work of Heaney and Carson suggest that with this collection, McGuckian is consciously asserting her right to inclusion in the Northern Irish canon—not just as maid-of-honour, but as a chief witness to its ceremonial sectarianism. McGuckian has long been read as championing a feminist aesthetic, and her resistance to closure is better understood in this light, less as “obscure” or “instinctual”, and more as intellectually responsive to the difficulties of civil war histories.